

How housing associations are using voids during the coronavirus crisis

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Summary

Despite challenges, some housing associations are managing use their vacant properties (voids) to provide housing for vulnerable people that need to move urgently.

This briefing shares examples of how housing associations are doing this, and outlines examples of successful partnership working with local authorities and others.

The briefing covers:

- An overview of how housing associations are using voids.
- Key factors that mean lettings can still go ahead.
- Barriers to lettings.
- Preparing for the future.

We will continue exploring how this situation evolves among our membership as time goes on, and work with the government to provide further clarity and guidance in managing void properties.

If you have any questions about this work, please contact Suzannah Young via suzannah.young@housing.org.uk

Introduction

The coronavirus outbreak has led to housing associations making substantial changes in the way they operate. We know that, as a result of the coronavirus crisis, there have been changes to allocations and lettings procedures.

To explore this further, we contacted 17 individual housing association members and surveyed our wider membership (31 responses) to find out what approaches they are currently taking to void management. We have also reviewed examples from press articles on the accommodation of rough sleepers.

Although the results cover a small proportion of NHF membership, it is possible to draw the conclusion that void management is affecting housing associations in different ways, and that there are some solutions to the current problems arising.

This briefing shares our findings and outlines:

1. How housing associations are using voids during the coronavirus outbreak (page 3).
2. Key factors that mean lettings can still go ahead (page 4).
3. Barriers to lettings (page 6).
4. How housing associations are preparing for the future (page 7).
5. Conclusion and next steps (page 7).

We have used case studies throughout this briefing, and shared additional examples of successful local partnerships at the end in an appendix (page 8).

We hope these findings provide useful examples of what housing associations are doing, that others can learn from. We will also share these findings with decision-makers and key stakeholders in order to push for more clarity where it is required, or where a different policy approach would help housing associations in their work.

1. How are housing associations using voids during the coronavirus outbreak?

Our findings have shown that housing associations have so far taken a mixed approach to void management, with some continuing for the foreseeable future and others pausing. Some have stopped long-term lettings unless there is an emergency need, and some are providing emergency temporary accommodation for rough sleepers and other people who need to self-isolate.

Others are speeding up lettings to free up temporary accommodation. Some housing associations are relieving pressure on the NHS and social care services by preparing properties for hospital discharge and providing support in hotels newly procured as temporary accommodation. This all usually happens in cooperation with the local authority.

Case study – Riverside Wigan

Riverside Wigan have set up a 'local taskforce' lead by the local authority. This includes the pre-existing Springboard supported housing partnership. Riverside Wigan are a partner alongside the drug and alcohol agency, and providers of day services and night shelters, as well as Public Health to feed in the latest advice on staying safe in the crisis.

The taskforce comes together on a weekly video call to coordinate action for the individuals in the area who are known to be at risk, and any other support which needs to be arranged. As a result, B&B placements for everyone in inappropriate accommodation for self-isolation or social distancing have been sourced, and there is a ready-made response group for any escalations of changes that might happen in coming weeks.

These services are part of a broader network of support for customers. This work has shown that leadership from local authorities, and collaboration between providers when all are willing to take time to share their needs, can save a huge amount of time and stress when it comes to making quick decisions.

Case study – Karbon Homes

Karbon's housing management team was approached by the strategic housing manager at Durham County Council to fast track urgent cases of homeless people needing a permanent home. These new tenants had been in temporary accommodation, as they were classed as statutory homeless. Durham council were keen to get them moved on to permanent accommodation. Karbon's team signed up the new people, and Durham council has provided the furniture for their new homes. They were able to rehouse customers and are continuing working with Durham council to assist in any way they can.

More housing associations are providing emergency long-term moves for vulnerable groups than are specifically providing self-isolation accommodation for rough sleepers. Groups moved on an emergency basis include:

- Hospital discharges.
- Homeless people.
- People fleeing domestic abuse.
- NHS keyworkers.
- Rough sleepers (including through Housing First).
- Looked after children.
- Ex-offenders.
- Other vulnerable people.

Case study – Mosscafe St Vincent (MSV)

Lettings on MSV's schemes have been suspended except for emergency moves required to ease hospital discharge and homelessness. They are still carrying out emergency lets to those in desperate circumstances. Recent examples are:

- Rehousing a woman fleeing domestic violence from a city in the Midlands who needed to live near Stockport
- An NHS keyworker who was sofa surfing.
- A number of rough sleepers through Housing First.

2. Key factors that mean lettings can still go ahead

In some cases, housing associations have been able to, for the greatest part, continue lettings as normal. This is thanks to innovation, safety planning, dedicated in-house teams, good relationships with contractors, and partnership working with the local authority and other stakeholders. Housing associations have been able to carry on letting using the below techniques:

- Good communication and clear guidance for staff, briefings for managers and information for local authorities on what members are doing and how.
- Using in-house staff to carry out necessary works.
- In some cases, regular contractors still working.
- Using technology to carry out virtual viewings and digital sign ups.
- Staggering handovers to ensure minimal contact with others, and to maintain social distancing guidelines when technology isn't available. When staff do

attend sign-ups, they will be wearing gloves, carrying hand sanitiser, and – unless they are vulnerable – applicants will attend the handover alone.

- Sheltered housing residents (or anyone who finds virtual viewings challenging) can use telephone explanations of tenancy terms and descriptions of property, floor plans and socially distanced signups. During phone conversations with applicants, support workers will discuss any symptoms they may be experiencing.
- Using key safes to hand over keys so that no contact is needed.
- Ensuring staff and residents use separate pens when contracts need signing.
- Providing staff with PPE where needed.
- Using direct lets rather than choice-based lettings.

Case studies – Akarma, SYHA and Yorkshire Housing

Akarma have a Method Statement for Tenancy Sign Ups during the coronavirus crisis. This includes getting paperwork ready the day before and ensuring clients and housing officers sign separately so they do not come into contact with each other. They also use key safes to minimise physical contact on handover.

South Yorkshire Housing Association (SYHA) are exploring the use of technology to do virtual viewings and digital signups to avoid physical contact.

Yorkshire Housing carried out a virtual viewing using live video to save a customer travelling and used digital signatures to sign her up remotely.

Case study – Sovereign

We've been doing 'virtual viewings' by video walk through. We've been trialling a mixture of emailing these to residents and uploading them to private You Tube Channels. Both have worked well and we would like to continue offering these moving forward. We're now developing some guidance for our teams on how to complete these in the best way to deliver the best customer experience. I think the commentary is really helpful. We're also looking to purchase some fish eye lenses to improve the picture quality. [Here's an example of one of ours that we placed on YouTube.](#)

There are clear factors that are important in allowing lettings to continue, some of these are:

- Innovative techniques.
- In-house staff to carry out necessary works or continuing relationships with contractors and suppliers.
- Local authority continuing to nominate.
- Partnership working with the local authority and other stakeholders.
- Good supply of PPE.

Some of the barriers should also be overcome thanks to the [specific government guidance](#) confirming that essential moves can continue over this period, where it can be done in line with social distancing guidance. However, the government's guidance does not address the practical issues raised above, such as the availability of parts and contractors – these are still barriers to preparing voids even for emergency moves. It is useful that the new guidance covers the issue of direct lets. Further guidance on expected cooperation between local authorities and housing associations would be useful to avoid inconsistencies.

Case study – anonymous

One housing association has managed to let 14 properties since the lockdown began. This is below their normal figures, but is still providing housing for people in unprecedented times. They have worked with external suppliers and contractors, all of which have embraced new ways of working in with PPE and risk assessments. Access to materials has been challenging, but with the introduction of risk assessments this has allowed them to deliver a (sometimes restricted) service.

3. Barriers to letting properties

There are barriers to lettings as normal and letting them safely, which are practical and procedural. Some of the barriers could be overcome with the help of specific government guidance on the issue of allocations. Here are some examples of why housing associations have been unable to let vacant properties:

- Several local authorities previously paused lettings or the choice-based lettings system or nominations have slowed, even though housing associations have voids.
- Previous government guidance suggested moving to a new house was not essential.

- Supported housing move-on work is no longer happening.
- There are lower levels of people moving, even for those who had already given notice. This is because vulnerable people those self-isolating is delaying moves. Prospective tenants are unwilling to move in or out, even if they have accepted a property, and often tenants are not handing back keys so landlords cannot gain access to properties to arrange inspections.
- Some housing associations feel they cannot carry out lettings in sheltered accommodation or where there are associated risks for older people or high-risk groups.
- It is difficult to clear vacant properties where residents have sadly passed away, because family members are currently unable to gain access to the property to clear belongings due to social distancing measures.
- It is difficult to carry out void inspections and interviews, viewings or signups with prospective tenants.
- It is difficult to prepare voids for re-letting because of restricted access to contractors to carry out repairs and electrical inspections to bring the property up to standard.
- Tips are currently closed so staff cannot dispose of broken items, and there is restricted availability of parts/furniture/carpets from suppliers.
- There are challenges preventing moving:
 - a lack of available staff to carry out deep cleans of properties
 - issues arranging removal companies
 - lack of storage facilities and general restrictions on movement.
- Extra work for in-house staff because contractors are closed.

4. How housing associations are preparing for the future

Some housing associations are already working with local authorities to prepare for the future. Some are specifically looking to rehouse rough sleepers, with a variety of plans that include:

- Continuing to let to rough sleepers they have housed, with move-on support built into the accommodation agreement.
- Switching to direct lets rather than choice-based lettings.
- Using Housing First and assessing voids as they come in for suitability for Housing First.
- Using choice-based lettings and private renting as normal.

The NHF would like to see government support for a move-on strategy to bring people, including rough sleepers accommodated in hotels and other self-isolation accommodation, out of alternative accommodation and into long-term housing solutions. This will need to be backed by sufficient funding.

Other people in temporary accommodation and those who were planning to move before the coronavirus outbreak will also need to be moved on.

5. Conclusion and next steps

There are a number of barriers to letting properties as normal that largely call for greater clarity from the government.

Despite these barriers, some housing associations are managing to continue using their voids to provide short and long-term housing for vulnerable people. The ability to do this is based on housing associations' ability to innovate, have in-house staff to carry out necessary works or continuing relationships with contractors and suppliers, and working in partnership with the local authorities and other stakeholders.

We will continue exploring how this situation evolves among our membership as time goes on, and work with the government to provide further clarity and guidance in managing void properties.

Appendix: Examples of successful local partnerships

These quotes have been taken from our recent survey on void management and case studies submitted to our Policy team.

“We work in partnership in our two main local authority areas to provide housing-related support services. Whilst face to face work has largely ceased, we continue to provide telephone support. In one area staff are now working more flexibly to staff a seven-day telephone helpline. In another area support workers are providing support to rough sleepers temporarily housed in hotels or other temporary accommodation. Funding is local authority commissioned and services are working flexibly to meet need. In one area this is an outcomes-based contract part-funded by a SIB – for the time being there is a relaxation on meeting outcomes based KPIs.” – **Anonymous**

“In Wakefield, Riverside worked closely with the local authority to find B&B placements for the handful of individuals using emergency access beds at Marshway House supported housing. Emergency funds made available for local authorities by the government were used to cover the costs, and support continued to be provided by the Riverside outreach team.” – **Riverside**

“Referrals into local and shared accommodation are managed by local authority Housing Options/Rough Sleeper teams in cooperation with housing providers.” - **GMHP**

“The Local authority moves rough sleepers into private rented tenancies and we provide support.” – **BCHA**

“Our close partnership working with the local authority allows for provision of rough sleeper self-isolation accommodation. We provide the homes to a basic standard and local authority uses the ones suitable for their needs. This is thanks to a long-term relationship. There is goodwill on both sides and a recognition we are all in it together” – **Anonymous**

“We provide clear guidance for staff, briefings for managers and information to Local authorities on what we are doing and how.” – **Anonymous**

“We have been working closely with Cornwall Council to prepare emergency accommodation, enabling hospital patients to be discharged with support. This essential work will help free up much needed beds.” – **Coastline**

“We are working closely with the local authorities to make sure they can directly allocate for those in priority need if they wish. If not, we advertise on the choice-based lettings system and applicants are continuing to bid, whilst understanding the allocation may be able to proceed but the actual move and tenancy start is only completed if in priority need.” – **Anonymous**

“Over 80 void properties are being provided to the council to house homeless people. A high void spec, basic furniture and decoration package is being included. To date, 20 voids have been taken. We have redirected staff resources to support the council with allocations.” – **ForHousing**